

AN ASSESSMENT

No organization can be expected to run perfectly over the short term – let alone for fifty years. The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service is not an exception. Nevertheless, looking back over its existence, AFRTS does seem to have come closer to fulfilling its total mission than many other government organizations – civilian or military. Many ingredients help explain why its operation continues to be so effective. Central to it stands the legacy of the guidelines established at the birth of AFRTS.

These guidelines grew out of the broadcast experience that Tom Lewis and his original staff acquired from their civilian radio days. They proved equally effective in a military setting. More important, over the years, the early directives remained foundational. That kept the organization from stagnating or losing its direction and purpose.

The guidelines also provided AFRTS with the flexibility of operation, as it endeavored to meet new challenges within a myriad of circumstances. The United States Armed Services at various times acted as a fighting force, an occupying Army or a peacekeeping organization. Those guidelines enabled the organization to incorporate quickly into its missions not only new challenges but new technologies as well. These ranged from various new recording techniques to, most recently, the use of satellite transmission.

Throughout the changes that have taken place, AFRTS has remained a military agency, firmly under the control of the armed forces. As history showed, military regulation oftentimes occurred to a limited degree in the wartime Hollywood headquarters. History also showed that when it combined with the creative chaos required to produce radio programs, it generated what some would call a “special” atmosphere. A tradition developed in which the staff felt an “military” commitment to their audiences, together with a “professional” excitement toward their mission. From deep inside patriotic souls, they gave, selflessly.

Over time, that commitment reached into every network and independent station. It created a dedication among the broadcasters to give their listeners the best possible service – often under trying and even dangerous circumstances.

AFRTS simply hasn’t had the resources to acquire every new piece of equipment that came on the market. Despite such practical problems, they’ve always managed to provide whatever’s needed to service American forces

worldwide. The “show went on,” whether on an Army base in the heart of Germany, aboard a submarine on patrol, under fire in Viet Nam or Lebanon, in the jungles of Honduras or the hot sands of Kuwait and Operation Desert Storm. More to the point are the broadcast packages. In World War II, they produced “Command Performance” and “Mail Call.” Today, they present “Charlie Tuna” or “Don Tracy” on Radio and “60 Minutes” and “Rosanne” on TV. Through it all, the radio and television weekly shipments have broadcast top-quality shows, just like the troops would find if they were listening to the radio or watching TV back home.

Perhaps more than any other nation, the United States has, since the Minutemen of Lexington and Concord, viewed its men and women in uniform as citizens first and soldiers second. As civilian-soldiers, our troops have always participated in the election of their Commander-in-Chief even in the midst of a conflict. Thus, it’s only natural that the nation has continued to make a significant effort to keep them informed and to show concern for their morale.

In bringing Frank Capra and then Tom Lewis into the service in those formative early days, General Marshall predestined that the broadcast media should provide education and information to the troops. He believed that they should understand the purpose for which they were going to fight. To carry out this charge, Lewis, the broadcasting genius that he was, knew that he had to attract the attention of his audience before he could present the military’s message. That spawned the entertainment side of military broadcasting, and the resultant effect on improving morale. Critical to that mission, the messages of both “I and E” and entertainment (morale) should be presented on the air “by enlisted men primarily for enlisted men.”

With his background in commercial radio, Lewis likewise insisted that the entertainment programming should provide “a little bit of home.” It should duplicate the same broadcast pastime that the men and women had back there. To maintain the audience, Lewis saw the need to establish credibility in the operation. Though he had to fight to accomplish it, he mandated that the news should be presented without bias or censorship. He also directed that the “I and E” components should keep the troops aware of developments back home. That would prepare them for their eventual return to civilian life.

These are the tenets of Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, as it evolved over fifty years, and as it stands today.

Over the years AFRTS has continued to follow these goals. The guidelines and philosophy have remained operable despite the changing times and circumstances in which American troops have found themselves.

One of the most amazing aspects of the organization's operation remains its ability to obtain radio and television frequencies in foreign countries. They negotiated with the BBC in '43. They fought through oral agreements with the Thai government. They held long discussions with Turkish officials. Through it all, AFRTS managed to gain permission and access to the airwaves in virtually every country hosting American troops.

Whatever the challenges and obstacles, AFRTS has survived. It has maintained its credibility. That's because the upper echelon has recognized how important the broadcast medium has become in providing information and news to the American troops in the field. Within the organization, the broadcasters, technicians and engineers have developed an *esprit de corps* and commitment to their audiences. This has enabled AFRTS to continue operations despite often limited resources and natural or man-made disasters. Always, the primary concern has remained the goal of providing service to its audience.

AFRTS has provided an even broader legacy, one which has benefited the entire nation and will continue to do so. From the end of World War II to the present, former AFRTS staffers have formed the very backbone of the American (civilian) radio and television industry. Many of these people had significant broadcast experience before joining the military, as did many of those who served during World War II. Others, particularly in the

1950s and 1960s, joined AFRTS soon after beginning careers in radio or television. They were able to polish their skills in the service before returning to commercial broadcasting. Still others spent most or all of their military careers working their way up through the ranks of AFRTS, learning all aspects of the broadcasting business. After retirement, those vets accepted positions at commercial or public radio and television stations. Their experiences in the AFRTS enriched their post-war broadcast work on the civilian side. In doing so, they performed for the nation's listening and viewing audiences for years to come.

It's been a glorious history. A proud history, of dedication, of traditions and selfless service. A tradition and service for which some gave the ultimate sacrifice. Through all the need, all the creativity, all the giving, all the work, all the struggle, it's been a history rewarded.

The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service reflects fifty years of devotion, from a crude crystal set in Alaska to a world-encompassing state-of-the-art operation.

Today, as five decades ago, thousands upon thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines still echo to them, the compliment of their forefathers:

"Thanks, for bringing us '...a little bit of home.'"
Stay tuned for the next fifty years!

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